A Pair of Literary Judgments

by **Samuel Hux** (March 2020)

Lilly Samuel, Paul Klee, 1938

Literature is not by its innermost nature a competition. No art is. The chief judge of it is the relevant muse, Calliope, Erato, Terpsichore, whatever. . . Which is the same as saying the final verdict occurs *sub specie aeternitatis,* "under the aspect of eternity"—not according to this year's Nobel or that year's Pulitzer. But practitioners are nonetheless, being human, by nature competitive. Norman Mailer was fond of the boxing metaphor, taking on other novelists in the ring. Ernest Hemingway, who actually did some boxing, was famously competitive—with Scott Fitzgerald, with John Dos Passos, and his first novel, *The Torrents of Spring,* was in part a parody of Sherwood Anderson, who had done the unforgiveable by helping the younger man.

So, if creative writers cannot help themselves there is no reason for casual readers and professional critics to behave. Such-and-So are the only true what-nots. So-and-Such is the best this-or-that of the century. This is, when all is said and done, unavoidable. Try to think of a greater playwright since the Greeks than Shakespeare. Unless you're a proud and arrogant self-selector like George Bernard Shaw you know The Bard wins hands down.

Nonetheless, it is probably good aesthetic manners to try not to be too judgmental. I have to confess, however, that I don't even try.

I. The Poet-Critic

The great tradition of the poet-critic is not great in number.

It has nothing to do with the hordes of creative-writing profs publishing the occasional article so as not to perish: I said *great*. Nor does it include a great critic like Edmund Wilson who occasionally published a serviceable poem, nor even a great poet like Robert Frost who published a prose preface or two. Of course, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* comes to mind, as does William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, as does Edgar Allan Poe's *Philosophy of Composition*—but these are one-off affairs which do not signal critical publishing habits. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* is best thought of as part autobiography and part philosophy (mostly Kantian), which is how John Stuart Mill judged it when he countered Coleridge's conservatism to Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism. Among other great poets in English, Shakespeare had nothing to say, as far as we know, of his fellows, John Keats' critical comments seem to be primarily in his correspondence, and William Butler Yeats' prose, excepting his autobiographical stuff, is mostly weird mythological nonsense of doubtful saneness.

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The great poet-critics in English include T.S. Eliot, often and not quite justly credited with "inventing" the "New Criticism" of the twentieth century, W.H. Auden, with essays, books, and introductions which kept him busy enough that he never had to pad his income with any permanent kind of mere job. You can add to them Mark Van Doren (a much stronger and finer poet than English professors and anthologists seem to know, and whose essays on the "great books" are especially valuable and an intellectual delight), Allen Tate (*Reactionary*

Essays and *The Man of Letters in the Modern World*, to name but two of much), Robert Penn Warren (although a better novelist than poet), John Crowe Ransom (although the critic ceased writing poetry half-way through his career), and (why so many American Southerners?), the extraordinarily prolific Randall Jarrell. What the true poet-critics have in common is that there is no falling off in quality no matter the direction, critical or poetic.

And what about Samuel Johnson? one might ask, then, surely the greatest general man-of-letters in English (and, irrelevant though it may be in this context, the most admirable *Mensch*, God bless his memory, in English literature). What about him? Well. . . considering his career as poet, critic, biographer, lexicographer, novelist, playwright, translator, essayist, travel writer, and (as James Boswell lets us know) conversationalist, to think of him as poet-critic is almost a demotion. And, although I am uncomfortable calling it a falling-off, his poetry, so much of it imitations of classical verse, I don’t think in the same league with his Shakespeare criticism and his *Lives of the English Poets.*

So. . . where am I heading with this? To add another name, obviously.

“Less is more” has proven to be (more often than less) a dreadful aesthetic credo, inspiring and justifying boldly insipid architecture better suited to robots than to humans, monotonous music in which the intervals of silence are the most welcome parts, minimalist visual art that is an insult to the visible universe, and poems little different from workaday utterance one would be generous to call prose. But the clause “less would be more” makes a lot of sense: a great deal less

poetry than we have would probably be a good thing. Never has more poetry been published; never has it mattered less.

There are profound sociological reasons for the superabundance. In *Can Poetry Matter?* (1991), Dana Gioia's first book of critical prose (there are two others), he focused on one: the proliferation of "creative writing" courses, which require instructors who must in turn be validated by publication. "Like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers." That is not quite exact, since the consumers mostly *are* the producers—one of Gioia's points, in fact. Which is why contemporary poetry matters so little. "American poetry now belongs to a subculture," he writes, and not to the "mainstream of artistic and intellectual life."

There is a lesson here I do not think all poets will learn. The generally educated person who in another time kept up to some degree with the poetry of his day, because not to do so was to be considered not generally educated, no longer feels so compelled—in spite of the compliment that many poets pay him of speaking just as he does. Perhaps I should say "because of" instead of "in spite of": if poetry is not a "rite," as W.H. Auden said, "deliberately and ostentatiously different from talk," different from prose, then why bother with it? Would you attend a ballet to see dancers merely walk about the stage? But probably most "poets" could not benefit from the lesson if they learned it. We have far too much "poetry" because we have far too many unworthy claimants to the poet's mantle. That's *my* view, and I don't think Gioia would object.

The last essay of Gioia's first critical book, "The Poet in an

Age of Prose," since it is a discussion of the "New Formalism," might be considered an answer to the first and title essay, "Can Poetry Matter?" The new formalists consciously seek a general audience who "innocent of theory. . . had somehow failed to appreciate that rhyme and meter, genre and narrative were elitist modes of discourse designed to subjugate their individuality." But in another essay, "Notes on the New Formalism," Gioia makes some observations that temper one's optimism. Much of the new formalism is "pseudo-formal." The poem *looks* formal by virtue of its visual arrangement on the page, but the "architectural design has no structural function" as the "words jump between incompatible rhythmic systems from line to line." The reader's experience is "rather like hearing a conservatory-trained pianist rapturously play the notes of a Chopin waltz in 2/4 time."

By what authority does Gioia judge? I can imagine the liberal literary (a redundant phrase, that) professoriate asking this question, for although he was chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts for six years he was appointed to that post by George W. Bush ("of all people!" the literati might say). Well. . . he is the author of *Daily Horoscope* (1986), *The Gods of Winter* (1991), *Interrogations at Noon* (2001), *Pity the Beautiful* (2012), and *99 Poems* (2016), a poet whose poems are what poems have traditionally been but seldom are now: "the fine / disturbance of ordered things when suddenly / the rhythms of your expectation break / and in a moment's pause another world / reveals itself behind the ordinary." And, exquisite poet that he is, he is also the author of the most lucid examination of poetry I have read since Babette Deutsch's *Poetry in Our Time* (1954), which in my scale of values is like favorably comparing a book of historical reflections with those of John Lukacs or of philosophical speculations with those of Hannah Arendt.

Among Gioia's other general concerns: poetry's silence on business even when the poet is a businessman (as Gioia was—like Wallace Stevens and James Dickey), the phenomenon of "regional" poetry, speculations on the surprising dearth of Roman Catholic artists in America now in spite of that rich tradition, and "the dilemma of the long poem." On that last subject, two notes:

1. Gioia is the author of the best thing ever written on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a convincingly respectful reconsideration of that ridiculously undervalued master, which appeared in his critical volume, *Disappearing Ink,* 2004.
2. His poem "The Homecoming" competes very seriously with Frost's long narratives.

But Gioia's critical concerns are not merely general and theoretical. There is excellent practical criticism of old masters like Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, Robinson Jeffers, and lesser voices, and his essays on Weldon Kees, Robert Bly, Howard Moss, and Donald Justice are the most perceptive on those poets you will find anywhere. Mercifully, Maya Angelou is not discussed, but many other poets receive Gioia's undivided attention. A few might wish that were not the case.

While Gioia can be exceptionally generous—John Ashbery "is a marvelous minor poet, but an uncomfortable major one." Yes, that's generous. But like Jarrell, who wrote of Oscar Williams' poetry that it sounded like it was written *on* a typewriter *by* a typewriter, Gioia can also be wicked, and twice as funny. "Ideas in Ashbery are like the melodies in some jazz improvisation where the musicians have left out the original tune to avoid paying royalties." Commenting on one of Bly's brutalizations of Mallarmé, Gioia judges, "Not only does it not seem like the verse of an accomplished poet, it doesn't even sound like the language of a native speaker." Bly's

translations are important because they “underscore his central failings as a poet. He is simplistic, monotonous, insensitive to sound.” “One can always tell when Bly is excited. He adds an exclamation point.” There are lofty emotions here, but Bly lacks the skill to make his reader feel them, so “the reader remains outside the emotional action of the poem, a little embarrassed by it all, like a person sharing a train compartment with a couple whispering romantically in baby talk.”

I single out Bly for two related reasons. First, I delight to see an extremely influential poseur receive the critique he so justly deserves. (On reconsideration, I’m sorry Angelou was left out.) Second, I want to suggest that Gioia practices what he preaches. One of his major complaints about the poetry subculture, one of the reasons it is so hard to take seriously, is that so many of its members—all those Merrills and McClatchys—practice too much backscratching instead of honest reviewing. But not Dana Gioia. As this critic extraordinaire, puts it so elegantly, simply, and precisely, “Professional courtesy has no place in literary journalism.”

There are probably others I am slighting. Try yourself to make a perfect list of anything! There is Edward Hirsch, but, my apologies, I *know of* his poetry criticism but do not *know it.* The poet William Logan is a prolific critic, but I choose—not *quite* out of spite—to forget about him (*fuhgeddaboudit!)* because—more than a violation of professional courtesy—he brutally dismissed a very good but not excellent British poet who was practically on his death bed. On the other hand, it pains me to pass Guy Davenport by, but his poems and classical translations do not move me the way his essays do, in, for instance, the excellent collection with the wonderful title *The Geography of the Imagination.*

Is Gioia’s general literary excellence fully appreciated, as opposed to his reputation acknowledged? I don’t know. He once told me that he wasn’t sure his publisher really cared much for his stuff but had to appreciate the fact that it *sold*. (That it does is good news. There are some people with taste surviving. I failed to mention to him that his work is among the very few worthwhile offerings from that once-excellent house: take a look at the “poems” of Danez Smith if you have some time to waste.)

But, in any case, the only contemporary I am fully confident deserves elevation to the level I have tried to establish and justify—*the great tradition of the poet-critic*—is Dana Gioia.

II. And The Last Thing He Said . . .

There is a rhythm to Gabriel García Márquez’s novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* that sends one searching through music and physics for metaphors to mix. It’s like a brief song that seems to unfold as slowly as a symphony, with resonance and a depth that time must wait upon. The first sentences announce that Santiago Nasar will be (has been) killed. The early chapters tend to “rhyme,” so to speak; one of them concludes with “They’ve already killed him,” another “They’ve killed Santiago Nasar!” Then a curious lull. Finally, a quantum leap of energy, passion, sadness, exhilaration, and the reader is, all of a sudden, “somewhere else,” certainly no longer in a South American village. I had this experience of a quantum transport in the theatre occasionally—for instance, at the end of Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage,* when the murdered soldier arises and dances a kind of funeral jig (“Death, where

is thy stingalingaling?”). But there is no upbeat “resurrection” in *Chronicle.* Santiago is just dead.

I have to say somewhere—and why not right here?—that this little masterpiece from 1981 strikes me as the greatest novella of the twentieth century, a judgment I am free not to prove. And it has occurred to me that I wish some genius film director would do for it what John Huston did for its closest rival, James Joyce’s *The Dead.* (I’ve never been able to find Francesco Rosi’s 1987 Italian *Cronaca.)*

Over the first three chapters we learn that the killing occurred a quarter-century before; the narrator, strongly suggestive of García Márquez himself, reconstructs from interviews with villagers the deathday of his boyhood friend. Practically everyone—excluding the victim and those closest to him—had known for an hour or two that the murder would take place. The killers, the Vicario brothers, advertised their intentions well, obviously wishing to be stopped. Alter any one of several events and they would have been. But some villagers were hung over from wedding revels; others were agitated in anticipation of a visit by the bishop (whose boat merely passes with a toot-toot and perfunctory blessings). Confusion mixed with stumblebum miscues adds up to something like fate.

It’s not until the end of chapter two that we learn the reason for the killing. Bayardo San Román has wooed and won the resistant Angela Vicario. She has no love for him—and besides, she’s no virgin. Since there are no virtue-attesting red spots upon the bridal sheets, Bayardo returns her to her family on their wedding night. Who had dishonored her? She answers, “Santiago Nasar.” Is it true? Maybe. Probably not. The

narrator doesn't know. The villagers don't really believe it. And too many details suggest it is not true, even though Santiago is a good-ole-boy and grabber of girls' crotches. But once the accusation is made Angela's brothers must act to save family honor. So the hesitant, awkward ambush of their friend by the Vicario brothers.

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After the killing, the narrative lull. We hear of the vigil of Angela, who begins to love Bayardo once he's rejected her de-flowered self. In exile from the village, she woos him back with seventeen years of letter writing—none of which he reads; he's merely grown fat and lonely. By the end of chapter four, Santiago's death, which we have never witnessed, is so very, very long ago it seems to belong rather to the villagers than to him. Which explains a couple of curiosities in a book that is full of them: Just before Santiago is killed outside his house, the maid, who knows the Vicarios' intentions without telling, "sees" him enter the house in safety; his mother, Plácida Linero, witnesses his death agony, but in her many retellings she never remembers that. Guilt and pain revise history.

But in the final chapter—the quantum leap that convinces me of the transcendent greatness of this novella—in a meticulous reconstruction of Santiago's final minutes, García Márquez gives the death back to the one to whom it belongs—and in a very moving way. It stunned me as much as a funeral jig by a dead man. Santiago, who has been gutted, gathers up his

entrails, daintily flicks the dust away, and walks toward his house; he’s got a couple minutes of life left. Across a stream the narrator’s Aunt Wenefrida Márquez sees and shouts, “Santiago, my son. . . what has happened to you?”—“’They’ve killed me, Wene child,’ he said.”

It is no small thing—this that the novella was moving toward all along—to allow a character to place his own period, to comment upon and thereby claim possession of his own passing. “It’s the least one can do for him,” one thinks to himself—the sort of thing one says before attending a funeral.

García Márquez must have tired of always being explained as a South American writer. Faulkner was Mississippian. Once you’ve absorbed the significance of that, how astonishingly relevant does it remain? It remains relevant only if we read as insistent sociologues, literary geographers, sifting texts for specificity of time and place. But the best artists, no matter how “located” their work, have always pursued the elemental themes—and performed the elemental functions. One of these is to be the sustainer of *necessary illusions.* Some of us say we’d like to die in our sleep. I doubt it. I think we’d like the chance to *say* something, stamp the moment with our own style, to *own* it. Scholars who would prove that Goethe did not expire saying “More light! More light!” or that Henry James did not go out with “It is here, that distinguished thing” are cads. And if we ourselves cannot stamp the moment, it is nice to think that someone else will. As literary anthropology, this is probably delusion: but I pretend to believe that the first poem occurred beside a grave where a friend chanted (maybe lying), “And the last thing he said was. . . .”

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